

Spittin' Game With Eight Arms Cellars

Projectile drinking: Fun for the whole family.

By Ellen Cushing

To become a champion-level wine-spitter, first take a good-size swig, bend your knees a little, and lean back about thirty degrees. Then, in one fluid motion, bob forward, exhale, and vibrate your lips like you're playing a trumpet or blowing a raspberry.

I'm informed of this about five minutes and one woefully feeble attempt too late by Kira, the reigning champ. Clad head-to-toe in charcoal gray, with a blond ponytail and the most piercing blue eyes you'll ever see, Kira is all business: She informs me she's been practicing at home for days, and though the competition isn't technically over, she appears to be unbeatable. She is eight years old.

Among the adults, Peter is currently in the lead, having recorded a seventeen-footer. And overseeing this whole messy operation is Iain Boltin, an affable Aussie who's a bang-up spitter himself, but more importantly, the one-man force behind Eight Arms Cellars, a Berkeley-based boutique winery that — in addition to having access to some of the cutest kids on the face of the planet and an admirable sense of whimsy — makes damn fine wine.

Like a growing number of small local vintners, Boltin got into the business later in life as an extension of his own extracurricular interests. He'd always been passionate about wine from the drinking end, and in the early 2000s, found himself working in advertising, bored as hell, and entertaining the idea of an honest-to-god career change. He eventually took a month off from work to intern for Dashe Cellars during the 2004 harvest, and after that, he said, "I didn't ever want to go back to work." So he didn't. Eight Arms was founded a couple years later, and Boltin says he hasn't looked back.

Which isn't to say it's always been easy. The name, in fact, is a reference to the fact that as a one-man operation, Boltin often wishes he had eight arms. And, as the aforementioned explosion in East Bay wine continues to, well, explode, Boltin said it's increasingly hard to differentiate yourself from the the competition. Boltin does that mostly by making uniformly delicious and well-balanced wines in small batches, sold for not-obscene prices. But there's also an infectious — indeed, childlike — kind of enthusiasm to the whole thing: Boltin is unapologetically serious about wine, but not so serious that he's above letting a bunch of people spit it out all over the sidewalk. (By the way, the kids — parenting police take note — are spitting grape juice, not Syrah.)

Toward the end of the contest, Kira decides she wants to try again. She's warned by a protocol-minded six-year-old that her previous distance will be voided, so if she does worse, she'll be out of the running. It's a gamble she's willing to take. She jumps up and down a little, shaking her hands out like a boxer right before another round, then leans back and lets loose with a majestic fourteen-and-a-half-foot spray to take the kids' competition by a landslide. And the crowd goes wild!